

## Korean War

In the Korean War (1950-53) a U.S.-dominated United Nations coalition came to the aid of South Korea in responding to an invasion by North Korea, which was aided by the USSR and allied with Communist China; the war ended in a military stalemate and the restoration of the political status quo. Concurrently, the United States was assuming increasing leadership of the Western nations against what were perceived as the expansionist intentions of its former ally, the USSR. As this COLD WAR heated up, it brought the United States into a military confrontation with Communist forces in Korea.

### BACKGROUND

The Korean peninsula was a Japanese possession from 1910 to 1945. When World War II ended in the Pacific in 1945, the USSR administered the surrender of Japanese forces north of the 38th parallel in Korea, and the United States supervised the surrender in the South. The two allies established a joint commission to form a provisional Korean government. The Soviets and the Americans soon disagreed, however, on the legitimacy of the competing political groups that sought to govern Korea, and mutual suspicions mounted.

In 1947 the United States asked the United Nations to attempt to unify the northern and southern halves of the country. The 38th parallel hardened ominously, however, into an international boundary in 1948 with the establishment of Syngman RHEE's Republic of Korea in the South and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea under KIM IL SUNG in the North. The arbitrarily set border split the peninsula both politically and economically into a Communist industrial North and a primarily agricultural South, which was dependent on U.S. aid. By 1949 both the USSR and the United States had withdrawn most of their troops, leaving behind small advisory groups; the North Korean troops were much better trained and equipped than those in the South, however. Increasing hostility led to sporadic border clashes between North and South Koreans throughout 1949 and into 1950. In September 1949 a UN commission, after trying unsuccessfully to unify the country, warned of the possibility of civil war.

### THE INVASION OF SOUTH KOREA

The withdrawal of U.S. forces and a speech (Jan. 12, 1950) by Secretary of State Dean ACHESON excluding South Korea from the U.S. defensive perimeter in the Pacific encouraged North Korea to take a bold military action. At approximately 4 AM on June 25, 1950, artillery of the North Korean Army opened fire on South Korean units standing watch south of the 38th parallel. About 30 minutes later the first of about 80,000 North Korean troops crossed the border. At 5:30 AM the main attack, consisting of North Korean infantry and tanks, advanced along the shortest route between the 38th parallel and Seoul, the capital of South Korea. North Korean divisions also struck in the mountains of central Korea and along the east coast.

Reacting to initial reports of the fighting, the United States requested (June 25) an emergency meeting of the UN Security Council to discuss the situation. After confirming the details of the invasion and deciding that the attack was a breach of the peace, the Security Council called on the North Korean government to cease hostilities. Because it seemed clear by June 27 that the North Koreans intended to disregard the UN request, the Security Council met again to consider a new resolution—one recommending that "the members of the United Nations furnish such assistance to the Republic of Korea as may be necessary to repel the armed attack and to restore international peace and security in the area." After some debate the resolution passed. The USSR was not represented in the Security Council because it was boycotting that body in protest over the exclusion of Communist China from the United Nations.

In the meantime, U.S. President Harry S. TRUMAN conferred with Acheson and concluded that the USSR had directed the invasion. On June 27, Truman, without a congressional declaration of war, committed U.S. military supplies to South Korea and moved the U.S. Seventh Fleet into the Formosa Strait, a show of force meant to intimidate China. The Chinese, however, preoccupied since World War II with internal affairs and concerned with regaining Taiwan, had so far remained aloof from the Korean problem, as they had during the 1904-05 war. Proceeding unilaterally, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) directed (June 30) General of the Army Douglas MACARTHUR, the American commander in East Asia, to commit his ground, air, and naval forces against the North Koreans. On July 7 the UN Security Council passed a resolution requesting that all member states wishing to aid South Korea make military forces and assistance available to the United States, which would designate the commander of the unified forces. By this resolution, President Truman became the executive agent for the UN on all matters affecting the war in Korea, and MacArthur became the commander in chief, UN Command. Although the United States ultimately contributed most of the air and sea power and about half of the ground forces (with South Korea supplying the bulk of the remainder), MacArthur controlled the allied war effort of a total of 17

combatant nations (the largest contributors, after the United States and South Korea, being Australia, Canada, Great Britain, and Turkey). Five additional nations provided medical units.

## DELAY AND DEFENSE

MacArthur's sole hope of saving the South Koreans from the superior Soviet- and Chinese-trained North Korean forces was to hold the port of PUSAN at the southern tip of the Korean peninsula until help arrived. He rushed reinforcements north to bolster the hard-pressed South Korean Army; on July 5, American units made contact with North Korean tanks and infantry just north of Osan. The Eighth Army, commanded by Lt. Gen. Walton H. Walker (1889-1950), delayed the North Koreans north and west of the Naktong River, the last natural barrier protecting Pusan. As the North Koreans pushed south toward the Naktong, however, Walker moved the Eighth Army into what came to be known as the Pusan Perimeter, a two-sided front (240 km/150 mi long), which survived only because of the timely arrival of reinforcements and American air superiority over the battlefield.

Beginning on August 5 the North Koreans launched a series of violent attacks against the perimeter in an effort to capture Pusan. By September 12, however, reinforcements had greatly increased the combat power of the allies, and the North Korean offensive had spent itself.

## THE INCHON LANDING

With virtually all enemy units concentrated against Pusan, the time for a counteroffensive had arrived. MacArthur had long planned a counterstroke against the port of Inchon, on the west coast of Korea behind the North Korean line. For several weeks he had diverted forces to Japan in preparation for this counterattack, committing to Korea just enough men and material to impede the North Korean attack on Pusan. His sense of how much to send and how much to withhold helped transform his greatest gamble into his most striking professional accomplishment.

Inchon, with its appalling array of tides and currents, was the worst sort of amphibious objective. The harbor was dominated by Wolmi-do, a small island which, if defended, could impede the landing and prevent tactical surprise. Disregarding strong objections to his plan, MacArthur remained convinced that the advantages of seizing the Inchon-Seoul area were worth the risks of landing in Inchon Harbor. He made a daring amphibious landing at Inchon on September 15, successfully cutting the North Korean supply lines. In the days that followed, the marines seized Kimpo Airport and the city of Seoul while the infantry turned south to meet the Eighth Army, which was pursuing a fleeing enemy north from the Pusan Perimeter. By Oct. 1, 1950, the North Koreans had been pushed out of South Korea, and the UN forces were poised south of the 38th parallel.

## CROSSING THE 38TH PARALLEL

In the meantime, President Truman's National Security Council advised against crossing the 38th, arguing that the ejection of the North Koreans from South Korea was a sufficient victory. The Joint Chiefs of Staff objected; contemporary military doctrine demanded the destruction of the North Korean Army to prevent a renewal of the aggression. MacArthur, they argued, would have to pursue it into North Korea. On September 11—four days before the Inchon landing—the president adopted the arguments of his military advisors while retaining restraints recommended by the National Security Council to avoid provoking the Chinese and the Soviets: no UN troops should enter Manchuria or the USSR; only South Koreans should operate along international borders; and if the Soviets or Chinese intervened before the scheduled crossing, it should be canceled.

On October 7 the UN General Assembly passed a resolution calling for the unification of the peninsula and authorized MacArthur to send his forces into North Korea. In a conference with Truman at Wake Island on October 15, MacArthur was optimistic about an early victory. The North Korean capital of PYONGYANG fell on October 19, and the allied UN troops streamed north virtually unopposed. They pushed the North Korean forces to the YALU RIVER, which formed the North Korean border with the Manchurian region of China. By the end of the month, the fall of North Korea seemed imminent.

## CHINESE INTERVENTION

In retrospect, the decision to cross the 38th parallel seems to have been the turning point in the Korean War. Beginning in late September, Communist China had warned of possible Chinese intervention if UN forces crossed the border, and between October 14 and November 1 about 180,000 Communist "volunteers" had secretly crossed the Yalu. Not knowing the full extent of the Chinese commitment, MacArthur believed that a furious counterattack on October 25 was a limited gesture rather than a serious intervention. By November 2, however, intelligence



officers had accumulated undeniable evidence that Chinese Communist forces had intervened. The UN Security Council was soon notified of their presence.

After his troops replenished their depleted supplies, MacArthur launched a "home-by-Christmas" offensive on November 24. Although some UN forces reached the Yalu, the Chinese army struck quickly and with full force. Stunned, American and South Korean units began a long retreat that ended in early January 1951, only after the UN forces had recrossed the 38th parallel and the city of Seoul had once again fallen.

### CHANGING WAR AIMS

Lt. Gen. Matthew B. RIDGWAY, who took over the Eighth Army after General Walker died (Dec. 23, 1950) in a jeep accident near the front line, brought the UN withdrawal to a halt south of Seoul. Beginning on Jan. 7, 1951, allied units began to probe north, opening an offensive that frontline troops came to call the "meatgrinder." Throughout January, February, and March, Ridgway's men pushed on relentlessly until they once again crossed the 38th parallel. In early April the UN advance slowed temporarily as units consolidated strong defensive ground and braced themselves for an expected enemy counteroffensive.

In the meantime the defeat in North Korea had forced the UN to reexamine its war aims in light of Chinese involvement. MacArthur quickly charged that he was facing "an entirely new war" and that the strategy for war against North Korea did not apply in a war against China. MacArthur wanted more forces and a broader charter to retaliate against the Chinese, especially to conduct air operations against the "privileged sanctuary" of Manchuria. In this strategy, he was completely at odds with President Truman and other UN leaders who wanted a lesser commitment and a cease-fire. The UN General Assembly branded Communist China an aggressor in February 1951 and voted to subject it to economic sanctions. Its new war aim was to contain the Communist forces along the 38th parallel while negotiating an end to the conflict. Even in the darkest days before the Inchon landing, American leaders believed that restraint was necessary to avoid widening the war. Now that China was involved, the administration feared that it might invoke the Sino-Soviet treaty and cause the Soviets to unleash their nuclear capability against the United States or mount a conventional strike in Europe. MacArthur's proposals to expand his force and to retaliate against the Chinese were, therefore, not favorably considered by the administration. MacArthur disagreed, too, with Acheson and Truman's policy of giving priority to Europe at the expense of the shooting war in Korea; he openly appealed to the public and Congress in an attempt to reverse the new war policy. During this period of cold-war tensions many Americans—most notably Joseph R. MCCARTHY, U.S. senator from Wisconsin—agreed with MacArthur's stand.

### THE DISMISSAL OF MACARTHUR

MacArthur had been a difficult subordinate. He had clashed with Truman over U.S. policy toward Taiwan early in the war and complained about the restrictions placed on his forces and his freedom to wage the war. He publicly suggested that the policies of the Truman administration had been responsible for military setbacks. On Mar. 25, 1951, just as President Truman put the finishing touches on a new initiative seeking a cease-fire, MacArthur broadcast a bellicose ultimatum to the enemy commander that undermined the president's plan. Truman was furious; MacArthur had preempted presidential prerogative, confused friends and enemies alike about who was directing the war, and directly challenged the president's authority as commander in chief. On April 5, while Truman considered ways to handle the problem, Joseph W. Martin, minority (Republican) leader of the House of Representatives, released the contents of a letter from MacArthur in which the general repeated his criticism of the administration. The next day Truman began the process that was to end with MacArthur's relief from command on April 11. On his return to the United States, MacArthur received a hero's welcome.

### STABILIZING THE FRONT

After MacArthur's dismissal Ridgway moved to Tokyo to replace him, and Lt. Gen. James A. VAN FLEET took command of the Eighth Army. On April 22, while Van Fleet's army edged north, the more than 450,000 Chinese opened a general offensive. Followed closely by this formidable force, Van Fleet withdrew below the 38th parallel, finally halting only 8 km (5 mi) north of Seoul.

On May 10, the Chinese launched a second offensive, concentrating their main effort on the eastern sector of the UN line. Van Fleet attacked in the west, north of Seoul. The surprised Communist units pulled back, suffering their heaviest casualties of the war, and by the end of May they were retreating into North Korea. By late June, a military stalemate had developed as the battle lines stabilized in the vicinity of the 38th parallel. Both sides dug into the hills and for the next 2 years waged a strange and frequently violent war over outposts between their lines.

## NEGOTIATIONS

In late June 1951 the Soviets proposed a conference among the belligerents. Although both sides wanted a cease-fire, negotiating held different meanings for each side. The UN wanted above all to bring an end to the fighting and to defer political questions to a postwar international conference. The Communists wanted to deal with political questions while negotiating a cease-fire. The Communists had their way, and the truce talks dragged on for two years before an armistice was finally concluded.

Negotiations were initially hampered by haggling over matters of protocol and the selection of a truly neutral site. On July 10, 1951, the full armistice delegations met at Kaesong, with Vice Adm. C. Turner Joy representing the UN command and Gen. Nam Il of North Korea representing the Communists.

On July 26 the two sides finally reached agreement on an agenda containing four major points: fixing a demarcation line and demilitarized zone, supervision of the truce, arrangements for prisoners of war, and recommendations to the governments involved in the war. Numerous problems arose, however, causing frequent suspensions of the talks, which in October resumed at a new site, Panmunjon.

One by one the issues were resolved until the only remaining obstacle was the handling of prisoners of war (POWs). The UN wanted prisoners to decide themselves whether or not they would return home; the Communists insisted on forced repatriation. A lengthy stalemate developed, reflecting the battlefield stalemate along the 38th parallel. A series of Communist POW riots that erupted in May 1952 on Koje and Cheju islands only complicated the issue. In order to force the Communists to negotiate in good faith, Gen. Mark CLARK, who succeeded Ridgway, increased air attacks over North Korea. On June 23, 1952, UN air attacks destroyed major hydroelectric installations on the Yalu.

By April 1953 the POW deadlock was finally broken, and the first prisoners were exchanged at Panmunjon under a compromise that permitted prisoners to choose sides under supervision of a neutral commission. Not satisfied with a truce that did not result in the unification of Korea and totally voluntary repatriation, Syngman Rhee disrupted the proceedings on June 18 by releasing about 25,000 North Korean prisoners who wanted to live in the South. To gain Rhee's cooperation, the U.S. government promised him a mutual security pact, long-term economic aid, expansion of the South Korean Army, and coordination of goals and actions in the international conference to follow (see GENEVA CONFERENCES).

On July 27, 1953, an armistice was signed, without the participation of South Korea, and the shooting phase of the Korean War came to an end. Although the precise number of Chinese and North Korean casualties is unknown, estimates of total losses range between 1.5 and 2 million, plus perhaps a million civilians in the north. The UN command suffered a total of 88,000 killed, of whom 23,300 were American. Total casualties for the UN (killed, wounded, or missing) were 459,360, including 300,000 South Koreans. Another million civilian casualties were incurred in South Korea. In addition over 40 percent of the industry and a third of the homes in that country were ruined.

Politically and militarily the war was inconclusive. For years the two armies continued watching each other over the demilitarized zone, a 4-km-wide (2.5-mi) band stretching 250 km (155 mi) across the Korean peninsula, waiting for the day when the fighting might begin again. Korea was no closer to unification; the war only served to intensify bitterness between North and South. The Korean War had other important results in the arena of international diplomacy. It contributed to the strained relations between Washington and Peking. In addition it added a new military dimension to the U.S. foreign policy of containment, which had heretofore been implemented by political and economic measures, including military aid. Originally formulated by George F. KENNAN, developed by Dean Acheson, and advanced by John Foster DULLES, the containment policy helped lead to U.S. military involvement in Vietnam during the 1960s.

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